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# THE JEWS OF OHIO



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# THE JEWS OF OHIO



"AN ISRAELITE HAS SETTLED IN CINCINNATI." THAT was big news in 1817 when young Joseph Jonas, a watchmaker, arrived in the Ohio city. For miles around the curious came to see him. "Thou art one of God's chosen people. Wilt thou let me examine thee?" Thus an old Quakeress addressed him, and examine him she did. "Well, thou art no different to other people."

It was a hard trip to Cincinnati in 1817. There were only two routes open to the hopeful pioneer. One was from the East, by horseback and wagon across the mountains to Pittsburgh. Danger from cold and Indian attacks was ever present. From Pittsburgh the traveler moved south on the Ohio River, if it was not frozen over. It took many weeks for a flatboat to reach Cincinnati.

The other way to Cincinnati lay from the South. In coming from New Orleans, it was necessary to travel over the Natchez Trace, through Indian country to Cincinnati.

The trip was hard, but the pioneers were not deterred. By 1819 five Jews gathered together in Cincinnati to say their High Holyday prayers. Not enough yet for the traditional Jewish *minyan* of ten males, but it was the beginning of a settlement.

There had, of course, been transient Jews in the Ohio River Valley since the time of the first white settlements. The Gratz brothers, Barnard and Michael, of Philadelphia, were engaged in the Indian and fur trade in the Ohio Valley as early as the 1760's. Colonel David Salisbury Franks, in return for his services in the Revolutionary War, received a land grant in Ohio from Congress. He was also employed by the Scioto Company, which began to colonize in Ohio about the year 1790.

Of other Jewish settlers we know virtually nothing, beyond that there were others. In 1821, there seemed to be only six known Jews in Cincinnati. But a man named Benjamin Leib, or Lape, who was on his deathbed, made the request that some Jews be called to his side. Though a Jew by birth, he had married outside of the faith, had not lived a Jewish life, and was not even known as a Jew. But now, as he lay dying, his last request was that he be buried in a Jewish cemetery according to the traditions of his fathers. His last wish was granted.

Slowly the Jewish community in Cincinnati continued to grow. Joseph Jonas, the first settler, had come from England. Friends soon came to join him from the British Isles. The first Jewish child to be

born west of the Alleghenies was the son of David I. and Eliza Johnson. He was born in Connersville, Indiana, on February 1, 1819. To this same couple belongs the honor of becoming Cincinnati's first Jewish parents. Another son of theirs, Frederick A. Johnson, was born on June 2, 1821, to become the first native Jewish Cincinnati.

The year 1824 was an important date in the history of the Jews of Ohio. It was in this year that the first congregation was formed—Congregation Bene Israel of Cincinnati. But not only religious institutions were being created that year; it was also the date of the first recorded Jewish marriage in the trans-Allegheny country. In Cincinnati, Morris Symonds and Rebekah Hyams were married by Joseph Jonas on September 15th.

Because the laws of Bavaria, Bohemia, and other German lands limited the number of Jewish marriages, a large stream of German Jewish young people, especially betrothed couples, began to stream into Ohio. A German Jewish writer who visited those early settlers in America characterized them thus: "They brought along . . . a staff and support over unpromising beginnings: optimism joined with common sense, trust in God, and a ready arm, besides indefatigable industry and inexhaustible perseverance, together with those peculiar traits—sobriety and economy."

Quite a glowing tribute, but their record proved them worthy of it. Some were unskilled persons

without a trade. Arriving in America without money, of necessity they sought a way of making a living. But few occupations were open to them in the then primarily agricultural West. There was only one thing for them to do: they became peddlers. With heavy packs upon their backs, they took to the highroads and the byways of the state. They wandered from village to village, from farm to farm. Only on the Sabbath were they able to return to their families. But slowly they managed to save their money, to acquire small stores, and to build for themselves a settled existence in towns or cities.

The German immigration of the middle-nineteenth century had an important effect upon the life of the Jews in Ohio. The number of Jews and Jewish institutions in the state began materially to increase. One of the first Jews in northern Ohio was Dr. Daniel L. M. Peixotto, who was called in 1836 to become a professor at Willoughby Medical College. In 1837 Simson Thorman arrived in Cleveland from Germany; in 1839 the first congregation was formed there, The Israelitish Society. The first spiritual leader was Isaac Hoffman, who served as rabbi, cantor, and circumciser. By 1842 the community had grown large enough for disagreement over ritual to arise. The community split into two factions, and the Anshe Chesed Society was formed. The community remained divided until 1846, when the two congregations were again brought together under the name of Anshe Chesed Israelitish Society.



This group then erected the first synagogue, at a cost of \$1,500.

One Judah Nusbaum settled in Columbus in 1838, four years after the city was incorporated. Soon more Jews began to arrive in the city. The first congregation, B'nai Jeshurun, was founded in 1852, although religious services must have been held there earlier. A merchant, Simon Lazarus, volunteered to act as rabbi. In 1842 the first Jews settled in Dayton; the first congregation was established in that town in 1850. Other Jewish communities founded at this time were those of Akron (about 1850), Hamilton (1855), Piqua (1858,) and Portsmouth (1858).

The leading Jewish community of early Ohio, however, was that of Cincinnati. In 1849 the Jewish population here was estimated at 4,000, out of a general population of 155,000. An interesting item from an Anglo-Jewish newspaper of the time shows the growth of the community: "When the congregation in Cincinnati was first established, they baked about a hundred pounds of matzos. This year, 1849, it takes them six weeks to prepare the quantities required by machinery, and fears are entertained that the time will not be sufficient, as over twenty thousand pounds will not fill the demand."

Already in 1841 another congregation had been formed in that town. It drew its membership from the German immigrants and was called Bene Jeshurun. A third congregation, Adath Israel, was

founded in 1847; a fourth, Ahabath Achim, in 1848.

The Cleveland community likewise continued to grow. A new congregation was founded there in 1850, Tifereth Israel.

The Jews of Ohio lived useful and productive lives. The distinguished Rabbi Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia, who visited them in 1847 and 1848, wrote that they were mostly retail dealers and mechanics. Proudly he pointed to the fact that "their credit is excellent and their reputation well established." They fought vigorously for the implementation of their civil liberties. In 1845, a Cincinnati Jewish merchant appealed to the Court of Common Pleas of Hamilton County against fines imposed by the mayor of Cincinnati. The Jewish merchant had kept open on Sunday. The mayor's decision was reversed as "unconstitutional and at variance with the spirit of free toleration." A Jew whose store was closed on the Jewish Sabbath was permitted to keep it open on the other six days of the week.

Not only did the Jews create religious institutions, but they also organized social ones. Typical of the many clubs and lodges that were formed is the B'nai B'rith. The first lodge to be chartered in the West, and the fourth in the United States, was Bethel Lodge of Cincinnati, founded in 1849. This was the first B'nai B'rith lodge with an English, not a German, ritual. In 1855 this lodge played host to the Constitutional Grand Lodge, the first time

it had ever met outside of New York. Alongside the B'nai B'rith there grew up other organizations, as, for example, the B'rith Abraham and the Young Men's Hebrew Association. The many clubs and lodges provided for the social life of the community, and also served as mutual aid and insurance societies.

The beginning of the Civil War found a strong Jewish community in Ohio. More than 1,000 Jews enlisted in the Union armies, a number, it would seem, that was greater than their percentage in the general population. Many of the soldiers were of foreign birth, but they fought with devotion for their adopted country. Fifty-two of them made the supreme sacrifice, and sixteen were wounded. From their ranks also came some of the heroes of the war—three received the Medal of Honor. Among them was David Urbansky, of the 58th Ohio Infantry. He was cited for distinguished bravery and coolness under heavy fire at the battles of Shiloh and Vicksburg. Shortly after the war (1868), Samuel Shlesinger was one of the fifty scouts who held a force of almost 1,000 Indians at bay at the battle of Beecher's Island in Colorado. Shlesinger later became a well-known citizen of Cleveland.

The close of the Civil War found the Jewish community in Ohio almost fifty years old. Many changes had come about since the days when the pioneer made his way west through the mountains on horseback and down the Ohio on a flatboat.

There were railroads now, and on the rivers the steamboats plied their ways. The cities had grown to substantial size. The community was wealthier, more firmly established. Yet there was much that could be improved in the religious life of the congregations. True, some institutions had been created, but they were still in their early stages. A skilful hand was needed to guide their tender growth.

Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, a Bohemian immigrant, filled that need. He had been called to the pulpit of Congregation Bene Jeshurun of Cincinnati in 1853. At that time he was already one of the outstanding liberals of the American Jewish community. Believing in moderate reform, he introduced changes into the synagogal ritual and into the religious schools. But he was still not satisfied. Wherever he traveled in America, he noticed the jealousies and the antagonism prevailing among Jews. "Englishmen, Poles, and Germans, and among the latter, North and South German, Old and Rhine Bavarians, Hessians and Alsatians, etc. entertained no kindly feelings for one another. They teased each other whenever opportunity offered itself, and this led to malignity at times." To him, these differences had no place in the American community. All his thinking was in terms of a unified, harmonious American Jewry. To effect this purpose he brought forth a revised liturgy, the *Minhag America*, an American Jewish ritual.

In 1854, this versatile rabbi had founded an

Anglo-Jewish periodical, the first in the West, *The Israelite*. It was soon followed by a German companion, *Die Deborah*. Through these periodicals Wise advocated his ideas. It was in *The Israelite* that he issued the call in 1855 for a conference to be held in Cleveland to deliberate upon "the articles of Union of American Israel in theory and practice." This conference, called to bring about the creation of a union of synagogues, the establishment of a rabbinical college, and the revision of the liturgy, accomplished little. Wise was too advanced for the time, and his plans for organization fell through. Of the nine rabbis who signed the call for the conference, four were Ohioans: Isidor Kalisch of Cleveland, and Max Lilienthal, Rothenheim, and Wise of Cincinnati.

Isaac M. Wise remained undaunted, despite the apathy and discouragement which he met. In 1873 his opportunity came. He called a conference of congregations in Cincinnati; thus was created the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. The prime purpose of this Union was the creation of a rabbinical seminary. This was done when, in 1875, the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati opened its doors. Wise was its first president, serving in that capacity until his death in 1900. Under his guidance the school grew and prospered. By 1953 it had ordained over 570 rabbis who were serving liberal congregations all over the world. The work which Wise began was carried on by his distin-

guished successors, Kaufmann Kohler, Julian Morgenstern, and the present leader, Nelson Glueck. Many distinguished Jewish scholars have served on its faculty. The library, which began with a few works given to it by Wise, has grown to contain more than 120,000 books and manuscripts; thus it is one of the largest Jewish collections in the world. On January 25, 1950, the Jewish Institute of Religion of New York City merged with the Hebrew Union College.

The Union of American Hebrew Congregations also stands as a proud monument to its founder. Now having more than 500 congregations, it has always been a pioneer in Jewish educational effort and in communal affairs. For more than seventy-five years its offices were in Cincinnati. In 1952 it removed to its own building, The House of Living Judaism, in New York City. Its publications are used in most American Jewish religious schools, and its member congregations are an important segment of American Jewry.

Just as the organizations founded by Isaac M. Wise grew and prospered in the post-Civil War period, so did many others established by the Jews of Ohio. New and larger synagogues were built. Lodges expanded in membership. An example of this growth is the Plum Street shrine of Congregation Bene Jeshurun in Cincinnati. Regarded as one of the finest examples of Moorish architecture in the United States, this temple is still standing and

serving as a house of worship. It is the "Mother Synagogue" of Liberal American Jewry.

The year 1881 marked the beginning of a new epoch in the history of Ohio Jewry. It was in that year that the new waves of immigration rolled in from Eastern Europe. Suffering under the severe laws of the czars, Jews from Russia, Poland, and Lithuania began to enter the United States in ever increasing numbers. The existing institutions were not large enough to cope with this new group of immigrants. The following quotation from *The American Israelite* describes the arrival of some Russian Jews in 1882: "They were forced to spend the night in the little Miami Railway depot, where the employees supplied them with bread and coffee. . . . The next morning, when the community learned of their arrival, they were removed to the grounds of the Jewish Hospital. The Ladies Sanitary and Educational Aid society was soon on hand. Two thousand dollars was raised for immediate relief."

Many of the East European immigrants, unlike the Germans, followed proletarian occupations. They were garment makers, shoemakers, and tailors. Some resorted to peddling.

Slowly but surely the new arrivals became Americanized. They learned English, adopted American customs, and established their own social and religious institutions. The Reform ritual which they found upon their arrival was strange to them.

They cherished Orthodox traditions, and so they built Orthodox congregations in America. By the end of the nineteenth century there were in Ohio eighteen cities and towns with at least one Jewish institution; sixteen towns had a total of fifty organized congregations. Among the newer ones were those of Bellaire (about 1890), Canton (1885), East Liverpool (about 1880), Lima and Lorain (about 1880), Springfield (1865), Steubenville (1891), Toledo (1866), Warren (about 1890), Youngstown (1867), and Zanesville (1891).

The large immigration to Ohio continued until 1914, when it was stopped by the First World War, never to be resumed. The immigrants became Americans; their children attended the public schools and became completely American in outlook. They documented their devotion to this their country when thousands of them flocked to the colors in 1917 and in 1941.

The Jews of Ohio, today, are found in all branches of industry, commerce, and professional work. Joseph B. Strauss, a native of Cincinnati, built the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. It is the longest single-span suspension bridge ever built. The Cincinnati Jewish clothing and garment manufacturers have been active ever since the Civil War. Fashion Frocks Incorporated is a notable example of present-day enterprise. Many of Ohio's Jewish businessmen are engaged in various types of merchandising, and in the service industries.



They are well represented also in the sale of insurance and in the management of motion picture theatres. The Lazaruses of Columbus and Cincinnati are known for their originality in the organization and development of department stores. The late Julius Kahn of Cleveland and Youngstown built the Truscon Steel Company.

Jews have participated in the public, political life of Ohio since early days. Joseph Jonas, the Jewish pioneer, had set the pattern in 1860, when he sat in the state legislature. Others followed him to the state assembly and to the state senate. Many Jews have served their towns and cities as judges, councilmen, and mayors. One of the most distinguished figures in the civic life of Ohio today is former Mayor Murray Seasongood of Cincinnati. He is an authority on municipal government.

A number of the Jews have served the Federal Government in this state. They have held such offices as collector of internal revenue, district attorney, and collector of customs. Rabbi Joseph S. Kornfeld of Columbus served as minister to Persia from 1921 to 1924.

Jews have played their part also in the cultural life of the state. Both the Cincinnati and Cleveland symphony orchestras have had Jewish conductors and have drawn much of their support from Jewish patrons. Moses Ezekiel, the celebrated sculptor, lived in Cincinnati for a while, as did Henry Mosler, the painter. Louis Loeb founded the Cleveland

Art School. Jews were important also in the field of the theatre. Cleveland supported a Yiddish theatre for many years. The Cincinnati Medical School bears the impress of Jewish physicians who devoted their lives to its scientific advance. There is not a non-denominational college or university in the state which does not number Jewish instructors on the rolls of its faculty.

The Ohio Jewish community has long been distinguished in the history of American Jewry. In 1953 there were over 180,000 Jews in the state. It has risen to this number from 14,600 in 1870. Just as it has increased in number, so it has increased in importance. Its institutions have grown and have become exemplary for Jewish communities in many lands. The Hebrew Union College and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations have made themselves felt in all the continents. Graduates of the College have served congregations as far west as Australia. The seminary's graduates have become important figures in national and international Jewish life. Especially in Zionist affairs has Ohio played an important role. The Liberal rabbis of this state have for many years been important leaders in the Zionist movement. The late Alfred M. Cohen, of Cincinnati, a well-known personality in the political life of Ohio, served as international president of the B'nai B'rith from 1925 to 1938.

The Ohio Jewish community was not the product of any one wave of immigration. First in the prim-

itive frontier settlements, and later in the bustling towns and cities, the Jews who have come to this valley during the last 150 years have built homes for themselves and their children. They have erected synagogues and schools, orphan asylums and old age shelters, hospitals and social centers. They have identified themselves with every worthwhile effort of the people about them. Their tap roots are deep. In their own modest way they have done what they could to maintain the finest traditions of this great commonwealth—this is their home.





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